



**LDC Independent
Experts Group**

Making the SDGs a reality in LDCs: action for transformation

“Reimagining Development in the Least Developed Countries: What Role for the SDGs?”, London,
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In September 2015, the world signed up to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to be universal, indivisible, and to “leave no-one behind”. The goals mark a major shift from previous development thinking, and a potential shift away from the post-colonial era of aid. For the world’s [48 Least Developed Countries](#) (LDCs), the SDGs present an opportunity to transform their development trajectory – adopting low carbon, clean technologies and leapfrogging carbon-intensive lifestyles to a more sustainable development model.

But making this leap will not be easy. Many of the LDCs rely on aid and overseas remittances, while the ways in which they subsidise others’ economies (eg through cheap labour and skilled workers) are not recognised. Their own economic activities and future development are linked to global markets and value chains, creating vested interests resistant to change. The communities who might benefit most from a more equal, sustainable approach to development are distanced from, and often ignorant of, global policy ambitions. How many farmers have heard of the SDGs?

The SDGs also come at a time of economic and political upheaval. The old institutions have not delivered but new ones are not yet in place. Against this uncertainty, the space for civil society is being eroded and political debate crowded out.

Despite these challenges, there are shoots of progress, particularly at the grassroots. Communities, acting in partnership with business or local government, are developing ways forward, with innovative community approaches to energy, for example, and new business models. LDCs can share and learn from these experiences to forge new pathways to sustainable development. But the SDGs require more than incremental change. There is a need to transform finance for development, to build on progress under the [Istanbul Programme of Action](#) (setting out goals for LDCs until 2020), to face up to the political barriers, and imagine a new paradigm for development. This is a shift that must deliver benefits for LDCs, removing the need for special LDC status by 2030.

Four areas for action

1. Generate an alternative narrative for the SDGs and include diverse groups

Our current development pathways have failed to deliver safe, sustainable livelihoods and wellbeing for all, especially in LDCs. We need a clear vision for the future, built on the aspirations of the SDGs, to break through the current barriers to progress.

Delivering on this vision requires a broad coalition – it is not just the task of LDC governments, although they have an important role to play. Local governments, business, and civil society must all be included and encouraged to contribute. Alliances will play a key role, allowing information sharing and learning, locally, nationally and globally.

These groups need to hold states, and other powerful interests to account, and to advocate for sustainable development, using legal mechanisms and soft law. They need to shape policies, direct investments, and to challenge business as usual.

2. Rethink expertise: integrate and connect development thinking and practice

We need to rethink our understanding of expertise and open up development thinking and practice. This means breaking down the silos built around specialist knowledge. In cities, for example, there is no point in having separate, competing goals for environment, health, jobs, gender equality... they have to be thought about together. Rapid urbanisation is a reality in LDCs and local governments need to develop an inclusive approach, where wellbeing for everyone is the goal.

Local people have much to contribute. Slum dwellers, rural migrants and others in the informal economy are often left out of consultations, hidden from official view. Their perspectives are vital, and should not be ignored. “Informality” can provide solutions which should not be blocked by regulations, or classed as illegal activities. Allowing decentralised, inclusive and participatory planning processes will lead to new kinds of knowledge, which can be shared and learnt from. The LDCs have rich seams of indigenous knowledge and grassroots’ innovation, which can help transform our understanding of what development means. We need “a toad’s eye view” of activities at the grassroots, as well as an eagle’s eye perspective.

3. New directions for science, technology, and infrastructure investment

Science and technology offer great potential for transforming development, and the 2030 Agenda launches a ‘Technology Facilitation Mechanism’ as a route for ‘technology transfer’. But the traditional approach to technology transfer has not benefited LDCs, and reliance on existing technologies risks locking countries into unsustainable development models.

LDCs can move beyond the old models by ‘leapfrogging’ fossil fuel dependent industries and infrastructures. Local level initiatives are already embracing off-grid solar and mobile technologies, creating new opportunities for business, cleaner energy for cooking, lighting and irrigation, and valuable market and weather information for farmers. LDC governments risk missing these opportunities if they do not look to the community level. And donor governments and aid agencies need to consider the structural barriers to technology access, including trade and intellectual property regulations.

Investment in technologies that support new approaches is needed, and must be combined with innovative systems, finance, and business models. Engagement with the SDG Technology Facilitation Mechanism through the Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Science Technology and Innovation (STI), and the UN Task Team on STI could be useful here. But the software – the knowledge about effective practices on the ground – is as important as the hardware and ways must be found to share access to this knowledge as well.

4. Monitoring, learning and accountability

Finding out what is happening on the ground is a big challenge. LDCs lack human and technical capacity and many things are not counted, or data may not be collated usefully. The SDG reporting requirements risk becoming a box-ticking exercise, with LDCs once more dependent on outside support. Yet there are opportunities for more innovative approaches to data gathering, including working at the local level and using mobile phone technologies.

But there are also important questions to be asked about who decides what questions are asked and what data is collected. Whose data counts? And who has access to the data and who determines what the numbers mean? Accountability mechanisms need to be included in monitoring and reporting systems, with states held accountable to citizens. Resources and platforms are needed to encourage information sharing between countries, going beyond the remit of the SDGs.